

EUROPEAN MUSICIAN IN JAPAN

By ETA HARICH-SCHNEIDER

Eta Harich-Schneider, one of the most outstanding European harpsichord virtuosos, is at the same time one of the best-known music teachers of Berlin and the author of a number of books on music. She has also composed the music for various German films. During her concert tour in Japan in the summer of 1941, the German-Soviet war broke out and prevented her return to Europe. Since then she has made a name for herself in Japan and East Asia through numerous concert tours and through the teaching of Japanese pupils. Her instrument, the harpsichord (also called cembalo), is experiencing a renaissance in Germany today and has met with particular interest in the musical world of Japan. By learning to play Japanese musical instruments and by studying the Japanese language, she is trying to penetrate the spirit of Japanese music. In the following article, Mrs. Harich-Schneider tells of the impressions she has gathered in Japan, thereby making a valuable contribution to the understanding of that country.—K.M.

DECEPTIVE APPEARANCES

AFTER all he has heard about the Japanese soul and spirituality, the European musician on a concert tour in Japan is at first very much surprised. The first impression one has of Japanese musical life is that of an imitation of American stunts and fashions. One finds the same huge audiences, the same type of publicity, the same bustle on the part of reporters, the same eternal photographing before and after concerts. (Indeed, the latter unfortunately goes on even during the concert, where the photographers do not hesitate in the least to pop out from behind a curtain on the platform during the most beautiful parts of the music in order to flash off a few bulbs at the performer and then to tiptoe off again noisily.)

The usual choice of programs seems to confirm this impression. Audiences always want to hear the same, well-known standard works and virtuoso show pieces. The desire of the European public to study a master or a period even in the less famous works has not yet been felt in Japan. It almost appears as if, for the Japanese, Beethoven has once and for all revealed himself in the Ninth Symphony and Liszt in the *Campanella*, and as if these works were enough for all time to uphold the proper idea of these two composers.

But soon these first impressions are dissipated by contrary observations. One

discovers an immense seriousness, a brooding devotion and an almost obstinate zeal which are applied to the absorption and learning of European music and which are far removed from enjoying it only as a feast for the ear.

I, too, was conscious of this contradiction. I was at once moved by the eagerness and enthusiasm for our music, by the veneration for the performer, by an elementary, devout relationship to music. Were not the people here almost more reverent even than in Germany, the land of music? How could this attitude be reconciled with autograph-hunting of Hollywood proportions, with huge publicity campaigns and photographing, and with the great interest—so embarrassing to Europeans—in the details of the daily life of the performer?

MUSIC AND POETRY

The perseverance and the passionate enthusiasm with which the Japanese have been studying European music for the last forty years have led many Westerners to the mistaken assumption that the Japanese have lost the true feeling for their own music. We are only too inclined to believe that at least two generations have grown up without the influence of their own music, and that today the educated Japanese, feeling ashamed of its "barbaric level," has definitely thrown it overboard after hearing the revelations of Schubert and Beethoven. It is indeed amazing how the Japanese drink in our music. There

must be thirst there. But can an unmusical people be capable of such a thirst? Does it not rather prove awareness and spiritual flexibility?

What can most easily be explained is the fact that in Japan some German folk songs and the best known of Schubert's melodies have become natural expressions of the people. For the Japanese, poetry and music are most closely united. The art of the *samisen*—the most popular—is unthinkable without singing and without the meaning of the text. Our idea of "absolute music" is foreign to the Japanese. But the lyrical content of Schubert's songs is close to their hearts. It has often seemed to me that it sounded as natural from Japanese lips as when sung in Germany. Once, in a train, I heard soldiers on leave, happy to be home, sing with their arms around each other: "*Hör ich das Mühlrad gehn.*" And one evening, in a narrow, crowded lane in Aoyama, I saw a Japanese, dressed in his dark summer kimono, walking completely engrossed through the noisy crowds of women and children. He was whistling, with so serious, so gloomy a face that he might have been intoning an ancient Japanese hero's song—but it was "*Leise flehen meine Lieder.*" Why have these melodies become so popular? Only, I am sure, because the Japanese can interpret something Japanese into them.

It is by no means true that the Japanese developed only the other arts highly and that in the sphere of music they were poor and without roots until the West came. Japanese music, which is closely linked with poetry, drama, pantomime, and dancing, is on an equal level with these arts. The fact that this is not known outside Japan is not to be blamed on Japanese music but on the Europeans, who, themselves inflexible in this respect, are inclined to regard the rhythmic symmetry and clear harmony of the highly developed music of Europe as the only form of music worth discussing, just as they are inclined to accept no other manner of performing music than the free, emotional European manner.

MUSIC AS A CULT

It is true that the Japanese approach toward music is different from our own; and even when a Japanese interprets European music, he still cannot get away from his Japanese aesthetics, from his Japanese conception of art, in which he is deeply rooted. Japanese music has been very artfully developed to an exquisite intricacy, both in rhythm and melody, and in his performance the Japanese does full justice to this. Thus he is musical in the real sense of the word; that is to say, he possesses the necessary gifts for music of ear, sense of rhythm, and memory. But his manner of performing is opposite to our own. Where we impart our own emotions, the Japanese hides his. Where we grow out of ourselves, he destroys himself. To him art is like a No mask, in which his sacred dances serve the gods. Music, too, is very much part of this sacred service. Behind its mask the individuality of the performer destroys itself because it does not dare infringe upon eternity, of which music is but a symbol.

Although the Japanese strives for the greatest possible stylization and "depersonalization" in music as in all other arts, he does not perform "objectively" (by this we mean rationally). It is truer to say that he serves a cult. He casts a spell. This religious attitude is, for me, also the explanation for the veneration accorded a few great European works, to repeat which the Japanese never tires. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has become for him the object of a cult, the religious symbol of the spirit of all Western music.

The Japanese knows no "absolute music" in the European sense—but neither does he know any "profane music." I sometimes think of our European valuation which gives first rank to "absolute music," then lets that music follow which is bound up with poetry, places "light music" third, and "military music" last, and I wonder what a Japanese would make of these valuations. For, of all European music, the German, or, to be more exact, the Prussian military music has had the strongest influence in

Japan. Japanese military marches are faithfully modeled on it. But these shoots, taken from completely foreign soil, are more sacred to the Japanese than the original plants in their native soil are to us. To the Japanese, it is the gods who call the soldier, and music is the language of the gods.

THE "SENSEI"

The path of learning and the personality of the teacher are sacred to the Japanese. For him, that interpreter of his national music is the greatest who has advanced furthest in pure reproduction of style and who is himself nothing but a faithful mirror of tradition. It is a narrow European view to discover nothing but lack of imagination and musical feeling in the striving of the Japanese musician to copy his *sensei*, his teacher, exactly. Not only was the Japanese, before we came, not poor or without roots in music: on the contrary, he was so deeply rooted in his own conception of art that, even today, it is not yet possible for him to abandon it. Although he has assimilated European forms of art, his method of learning them has remained Japanese. This, and not lack of talent, is the reason for his wishing faithfully to copy what he has heard, for his studying from gramophone records, and for all the other methods which to us seem so strange.

I realized this for the first time during a lesson one day. I had proceeded from the only accepted point of view in Europe, namely, that music is something handed down in a distinct form and yet something flexible, something that has to be reproduced faithfully and yet, at the same time, be given new form through the personality of the interpreter. So I wanted to explain the general laws of music and then have them freely applied by my pupil in her playing. First of all I explained to her the laws of carrying a melody on the piano. Then I played something as an example, explaining carefully that she should not copy my performance slavishly but that she was free to give her own interpretation within the laws I had outlined to her. I shall never forget the sad expression in her

eyes when she looked at me! "But *Sensei* plays it just one way! I want to play like *Sensei*!" She did not even dream that I dared to express my own ideas and that I might even be proud of so miserable a venture. She was firmly convinced that I did nothing but faithfully pass on the traditions handed down through generations of musicians, and she believed that, for quite inexplicable reasons, she was not allowed to enter upon this sacred tradition, since I had expected her to be impolite and without respect, had expected her "to desire to play differently from *Sensei*."

COMPREHENSION THROUGH IMITATION

While playing his *Campanella*, Liszt may, at a certain point, once have lifted his head. Supposing that the knowledge of this moment had been preserved in the tradition of Liszt's pupils, a European pianist who did the same thing today would be ridiculed as showing affectation and for trying to copy Liszt. But if a Japanese who has studied under Kulenkampff or Cortot has noticed an involuntary smile on the face of his master at a certain change of harmony and henceforth also always smiles at the same place, he does this for a reason that is the opposite of affectation. He has noticed that, at this point in the music, the mood of the master was a gay one and that therefore this point signifies a gay mood. So he smiles because he wishes to become that which his master was, and this does not mean an outward copy of Mr. X but a faithful image of the musician *per se*.

The way of the Japanese in art is that of faithful imitation. It is a path of self-denial and of faith. His self-denial is rewarded by his final achievement of artistry, his faith by the eventual absorption of magic forces which makes of the pupil a master.

Once one has understood this, one understands all those things in the cultivation of European music in Japan which at first seem either backward or empty activity and so hard to reconcile with the rest of the Japanese character: the practising to gramophone records, the copy-

ing of outward mannerisms, the constant mania for the same program made up of the most famous works. For we know now that the gramophone record is for the Japanese the "faithful mirror"; that outward behavior is full of meaning and importance, since for him music and pantomime are inseparable; and that finally the famous standard works represent for him almost that which our familiar prayers represent for us: through their fame they have proved their sacred value, they have the greatest magic power, therefore it is our duty to play them over and over again.

Once one has seen the vocation of the *sensei* through the eyes of the Japanese, the adoption of American methods of publicity appears in a different light. As a European artist, one no longer feels as embarrassed by it as one did at first when one thought that this exaggerated activity was meant for one's own person. On the contrary, everything is meant for the idea of the *sensei*, and the desire to absorb every nuance during a concert is not lust for sensation; it is genuine desire to understand our music by understanding its interpreters, in whom the Japanese believe the entire tradition to be alive.

And in what touching ways does this veneration of the *sensei* show itself! I shall never forget the eager eyes of the flocks of girls in Niigata whom I had allowed to come onto the platform so that they were better able to see the movements of the hands; nor the lanes formed by young people after my concerts, reaching from the concert hall to the hotel, and all the solemnly bowing heads and the "*sayonara*" whispered by every pair of lips; nor the overwhelming solicitude for my comfort which was extended to every detail.

"INVOCATION OF THE GODS"

From the way in which the audiences reacted to each of my programs, I could easily

observe how the Japanese are prepared to accept, to understand, and to love everything that approaches his own nature: all music into which he can read poetic ideas or which is to him of semireligious significance. Consequently, Liszt's "St. Francis Preaching to the Birds" became one of my greatest successes: I played it at almost every concert. First of all, it is a musical poem; secondly, the pale, fragile colors of its descriptions of Nature correspond to the taste of the Japanese with his deep love of Nature; and thirdly, it is an "invocation of the gods."

My most treasured experience was the following one. I was once giving a performance of Schumann's music for Japanese women and, through an interpreter, I explained the poetical ideas underlying it by drawing parallels with Japanese poems and the art of gardening. When the concert was over, a Japanese lady got up quite spontaneously (this in itself is a very rare occurrence in Japan) and spoke impromptu about the profound spiritual kinship between Germans and Japanese which had been revealed to her through Schumann's music. What had been revealed to her, she said, was that both peoples believed that one could best speak to the gods through music. In the days of yore, she went on, the Sun Goddess, the original ancestress of the Japanese people, had hidden behind a rock; consternation and despair had overcome the people until they finally succeeded through music in persuading the Goddess to come forth and bestow her splendor again.

Music as magic! I thought of the wild, imploring sounds of the bamboo flute in the Japanese orchestra, sounds which wing their way over the chorus of the severe *samisens*, the chanting of the singer, and the intricate rhythm of the drums, as suddenly, as boldly, as serenely as a soul rising up from the earth.

